The Bright and Morning Star

On Winter Solstice, the Long Hope, and the End of the Night

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Closer Than We Realize

On the winter solstice, our intuition tells us we are the farthest from the sun we will be all year. The days are at their shortest. The light is at its lowest. Surely the sun must be far away. But the reality, of course, is the opposite. At this season, the earth is in fact at its closest point to the sun. We are nearer to the source of light when our perception of the light is at its dimmest.

There is a parable in that. It is in our seasons of darkness that we are often closer to the Lord than we realize. We have heard the same point made in poems and proverbs about footprints in the sand. But it bears repeating. When we go through troubled times, when we go through difficult seasons, we are *not* further from God. We may be nearer to him than at any other moment.

Don’t Make Decisions in the Valley

There is a song some of us grew up singing: “He put a light down in the valley, that we might see the way.” That is precisely what we need. The valley is not a great place to make decisions. There is not enough light there. And if we are not careful, we will make decisions in the valley that have not been properly illuminated by the wisdom of God. We need to pause. We need to hold. We need to wait and let God give us the kind of guidance he wants to give us.

My fifty-seven years has not been an adequate amount of time for me to acquire the wisdom to solve all the complex problems of this world. Almost every time I face a problem personally, or at work, or in shepherding others, my hands start to wring. I do not have the wisdom for it. But there is One who has been sent. And there is wisdom from above that we can pray for in our trials. James 1:5 puts it directly:

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

God has given us the wisdom of the ages: wrapped up by men and women who struggled, like you and I, to make sense of the world they lived in. God gave them inspiration, and somehow that inspiration was woven together in the Scriptures. And in those Scriptures we can have confidence that wisdom from God is available to us, that he can give us the direction we need.

"A More Sure Word of Prophecy"

Listen to Peter, looking back on what may have been the most extraordinary thing he had ever experienced:

> For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16–18)

Peter is recalling the Mount of Transfiguration. Just as Jesus was wrapping up his Galilean ministry and turning toward Jerusalem, he took Peter, James, and John up onto the

mountain: three companions, just as Moses had three companions for his ascent. There they saw Jesus transfigured, his future glory shown to them in advance. Moses and Elijah appeared, conversing with Jesus about how he was going to suffer.

Peter, in his usual way, started running ahead. “Lord, it is good for us to be here. Let’s build three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.” And then a voice boomed out of the cloud: “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him.” And when Peter looked up, there was no Moses, there was no Elijah. There was no putting all the prophets on the same level with Jesus. It was just Jesus.

That is what Peter is recounting. He saw the glory. He heard the voice. There is hardly anything that could give a person more confidence than what Peter saw on that mountain. *And yet* listen to what Peter says next:

“And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19).

Look at that move. Peter saw the glory and heard the voice with his own eyes and ears, and then says the *prophetic word* is the more sure thing. The King James Version has it: “a more sure word of prophecy.” What we experienced on the mountain, Peter says, was a *confirmation* of everything the prophets had ever spoken. The sure word is the word that has come down to us through their witness.

So when we find ourselves in the valley of decision, when we find ourselves in periods of darkness, we look back to the wisdom of the ages. What did *they* do? In their dark days, they doubled down on their hope in God. When the dark shadows were gathering, when the sun wasn’t shining, they doubled down on faithfulness. And Peter says that prophetic word is “a light

that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." We have been given a little bit of light to carry us until the final revelation of the Light of God comes.

Hope That Outlives Generations

How long did Israel have to hope, and when did they hope? It was not for a day, or a week, or a month. We live in an age when, before you finish your morning coffee, the creamer you ordered at six a.m. has been delivered to your door by nine. We are not used to being asked to wait. We are not used to a timeline where God's promise outlives the one who first heard it.

"In thee, and in thy seed, all the nations of the world will be blessed," God said to Abraham. And Abraham then spent another twenty-five or thirty years not seeing the promise fulfilled. Abraham died. Isaac died. Jacob and Esau struggled and fought. Jacob had twelve sons, and they did crazy things. Reuben slept with one of his father's wives. Simeon and Levi massacred the men of a neighboring tribe Jacob had just made a treaty with. Judah sold his brother Joseph, Rachel's beloved son, into slavery to Midianite traders. Over and over and over, these patriarchs proved themselves unworthy representatives of the promise made to Abraham.

And yet Jacob, on his deathbed, in a land that was not his, neither his nor his grandfather Abraham's, has the audacity to speak prophetic words of promise over those very sons. When we are in our valleys of decision, in our dark days, if we will look back to the days when God spoke promises over us, and hold on to those things, sometimes God has made the greatest promises to me in my darkest seasons, and I held on to those promises, and have seen them fulfilled, with others still being completed.

Listen to what Jacob speaks over Judah, of all his sons:

> Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people. (Genesis 49:8–10)

Judah was not the most faithful son. He had slept with what he thought was a prostitute and ended up being his daughter-in-law and fathering twins. These are the patriarchs. The faith of our fathers. If you think your story has already been written and that it has already locked you into some unresolvable depravity, look at the men over whom God spoke promise *before* they were able to take any ground toward righteousness. The scepter would come, and it would come from this very tribe.

"A Star Out of Jacob"

That beleaguered family of patriarchs becomes a beleaguered family of slaves in Egypt, and then a mighty nation, and they leave Egypt and begin to wander through the wilderness. The wilderness is where the jackals are. It is not a place of flowing rivers and grassy knolls. It is a place of suffering. As they wander, God gives them the laws, laws that make them strong and stable. God dwells in their midst.

Outside Israel's camp, a king named Balak hires a prophet named Balaam to come and curse them. Balaam arrives, looks down at the camp from the heights, and what comes out of his mouth is not a curse but a blessing. He sees the orderliness of their tents, the beauty of their layout, God at the center, the twelve tribes perfectly arranged around the tabernacle in the

middle. He cannot find anything to curse. So Balak sends him to try again. And on the second attempt, this is what comes out of him:

"I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

A Star out of Jacob. A Scepter out of Israel. We are already good students of the previous chapter: we know that scepter is supposed to come from Judah, the lion's whelp. Now Balaam adds a star to the prophecy. The pairing of *star* and *scepter*, sign and king, was well known across the ancient Near East. The magi of Babylon read kings out of the sky, and Babylonian rulers would put a star next to their name to claim divine sanction (not because they had done well in school). So when Balaam pairs the two, the meaning is unmistakable. A king is rising out of Israel, and his coming will be marked in the heavens.

The Suffering Servant

Israel arrives in the land. David becomes king. All kinds of promises are made to David. But the line of David fails. The kings did not become what they were called to be. The nation turned to idolatry, to injustice, and was carried away into Babylon. And it is there, in the dark of the captivity, that Isaiah and the school around him pick up the thread again:

> Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles . . . I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, and will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house. (Isaiah 42:1, 6–7)

This King (this Star, this Scepter) was going to be a *suffering* Servant. God would call him in righteousness. He would *become* a covenant: not just receive one, but *be* one. He would be "a light to the Gentiles." Do you see how the threads are coming together? The star out of Jacob. The scepter out of Judah. And now the Servant who is *himself* a covenant and a light to the nations. We have been given a Promise, and that Promise is Jesus Christ.

"Arise, Shine"

Isaiah doubles down a few chapters later:

> Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you. (Isaiah 60:1–2)

These are the people sitting in the darkness of Babylonian captivity. The captivity was so dark that the psalmist, writing from inside it, could ask:

> How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth. (Psalm 137:4–6)

"If I get too comfortable in this dark space of prison, help me, Lord, let my hand forget how to play, let my tongue cleave to my mouth." The darkness of Babylon can still our voice. It can steal our joy and our hope. But it was *in* Babylon that the psalmists began to write. It was *in* Babylon that the prophets began to speak of hope, saying, *Arise, shine. Your light has come.*

> Lift up your eyes all around, and see: they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be nursed at your side. Then you shall see and become radiant, and your heart shall swell with joy; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you. The

> multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord. (Isaiah 60:4–6)

Notice the visual words: *see*, *radiant*, *light*. Light entering a period of darkness. The sons returning from afar. The daughters being nursed. The Gentiles coming, bearing gold and frankincense. We are about to see how this image will be quoted directly in the Gospels.

Daniel in the Old Age

Daniel had been carried into Babylon as a young man: taken from his mother and father's home, brought into the courts of the king, and emasculated to serve in the royal household. That's a bad day. He spent almost seventy years not where he wanted to be, not how he wanted to be. And these are the words that come out of his mouth at the end of his life:

> And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation . . . But at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:1–3)

Not only would God send his King to be a righteous Promise to us, those who fixed their gaze on him would experience a kind of transference. The light of the King would be transferred to them. They would *become* stars. Paul says it in the New Testament:

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

As the old hymn puts it, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” Do you want the darkness of the valleys of decision to be filled with light? Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his face. And then a lifetime of beholding will cause us to be light and righteousness to others, beacons of guidance for those still navigating the dark.

“We Have Seen His Star”

And so we come to Matthew 2:

> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” (Matthew 2:1–2)

Foreigners. Magi. “We have seen His star.” *A star shall rise out of Jacob and a scepter out of Israel.* The pairing the ancient Near East had been carrying for fifteen hundred years, finally claimed by foreigners who had been reading the sky. They knew what they were looking at.

Israel was still under the crushing power of Herod; there are always Herods. There are always Caesars. There are always Balaks and Balaams, people who want to bring a curse, who want to consume our children. We have to be agents of light to withstand all of that. Herod summons his own scholars: “Where is He to be born?” They cite Micah: Bethlehem. Herod says, “Go and worship Him, and bring me word so I may worship Him too,” with a dagger. Light always provokes the dark.

> And behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with

> exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9–11)

Isaiah 60 fulfilled. “They shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.” The first sign of foreigners coming to worship the great Suffering Servant had begun. The light was breaking through the long night of empire.

“The Day Spring From on High”

Listen to Zechariah, prophesying over his infant son John the Baptist after his mouth had been opened again at the end of Luke 1:

> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76–79)

“The Dayspring from on high has visited us.” John would proclaim that the long-awaited Servant was about to bring light. About to bring peace. The end of the chapter is a crescendo, the great hope of fifteen hundred years building toward fulfillment.

And then Luke does something remarkable in the next sentence:

“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1).

If you imagine the music swelling at the end of Luke 1 (Zechariah’s prophecy reaching its climax, all of heaven leaning forward) Luke pulls the volume down at the start of Luke 2 to

something low and ominous. *A decree from Caesar Augustus.* The empire is still in charge. Zechariah, the no-account priest in the no-account land, married to the no-account old woman who happened to have a baby in her old age; these are the lowly of the world. There has been a crescendo of hope, and now the empire reasserts itself.

And then verse 8:

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8).

Country shepherds. Not even city shepherds. *Night-shift* shepherds. The rabbis of Jesus' day would not allow shepherds to be witnesses in legal proceedings; they were considered too low to be trusted. And yet the God who wants to declare that light has sprung out of darkness chooses to reveal it to *these* night-shift country shepherds.

> And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." (Luke 2:9–12)

All the pent-up light of a hundred generations of prophets and people of God, flooding the field around shepherds. And what is the sign? Not a king with scepter and crown and big arms riding a white horse. The sign is a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. We swaddle babies because they need to be comforted in the elements after the warmth of the womb. The King of the universe had to be swaddled. He knows what it is to be in darkness. He knows what it is to have forces of evil against him. He had to be cared for.

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'" (Luke 2:13–14).

Between the Times

We live between this great glorying declaration and the ultimate realization when the Day Star will arise once and for all. We are holding on to the light of the Word until the ultimate Light is fully manifested. Between the times, there is still darkness. There is still empire. There is still suffering.

Longfellow knew this. After his wife had died in a fire and his son had been wounded in the Civil War, he sat down to write the poem we now sing as a Christmas carol. He hears the bells on Christmas Day ringing out the old song of peace on earth, and he writes one of the most honest stanzas in any English-language hymn:

"And in despair I bowed my head; / 'There is no peace on earth,' I said, / 'For hate is strong, and mocks the song / Of peace on earth, good-will to men.'" (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Christmas Bells")

When we look honestly at the conditions of humanity, the realities of our life mock the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men. But God says: continue to hope. Continue to believe in me. Continue to trust in me. Because if we will hold on, the darkness itself will *expose* the light that is in us. Stars don't appear in the daytime. Stars appear in the dark. Let's be stars of righteousness.

"I Am the Bright and Morning Star"

Revelation 2:28 contains a remarkable promise from Jesus to those who overcome:

". . . and I will give him the morning star" (Revelation 2:28).

To the overcomer, *the morning star itself*. And what is the morning star? Look at one of the very last sentences in Revelation, the very last words attributed in red to Jesus before the book closes. Everything after this is back-matter exhortation; this is Jesus' own final self-disclosure:

"I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star" (Revelation 22:16).

"I am the Root and the Offspring of David." That is him saying, "I am the Lion of the tribe of Judah. I am the King of the universe. I am the One promised from the very beginning, when Jacob was trying to understand what his son Judah would become. I am the Star out of Jacob and the Scepter out of Israel."

"I am the Bright and Morning Star." The morning star is the last star to appear before the dawn arrives. "I am the One who will usher in an eternal day, a day when the night will never return. I am the end of the night."

The Lord wants to declare the end of the night for you. But until that final dawn, we stand in hope. We stand in confidence and faithfulness to God until we see the final day. And if we are faithful to him to the end, we are like stars in the firmament, not the morning star ourselves, but partaking in the Morning Star, casting his light into whatever darkness has been given us to walk through.

Be at peace. The Lord has come. The light is dawning. Those who have sat in darkness are seeing a great light. "Whatever our eyes see, our eyes can deceive us. Whatever our ears hear, we hear what we want to hear. We filter everything. But we have been given a more sure word of prophecy. Lord, allow us to gain our stability and our marching orders, to walk by the light of your Word, so that at the end of the day, we are not making decisions in the valley of

despair. Set a light in our valley, that we might see the way. Come, Lord Jesus, show us the way. Amen.”